

On the sentence-final *de* in the *shi...de* focus cleft in Mandarin Chinese

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1.0 Introduction

The *shi...de* focus cleft in Mandarin Chinese has been noted to give rise to a default past time interpretation (e.g., Ross 1983; Simpson & Wu 2002; Paul & Whitman 2008). Previous work suggested that the sentence-final *de* in the *shi...de* focus cleft is associated with the default past time interpretation (e.g., Chu 1980; Ross 1983; Simpson & Wu 2002).

(1) *Shi...de* sentence

Wo **shi** gen Zhangsan qu Beijing **de**.

1SG SHI with Zhangsan go Beijing DE

'It was with Zhangsan that I went to Beijing.'

(Simpson & Wu 2002: 176)

However, the bare declarative sentence (without the focus marker *shi* and the sentence-final *de*) in (2) and the bare *shi* sentence (without the sentence-final *de*) in (3) also have a default past time interpretation.

(2) *Bare declarative sentence*

Wo gen Zhangsan qu Beijing.

1SG with Zhangsan go Beijing

'I went to Beijing with Zhangsan.'

(3) *Bare shi sentence*

Wo **shi** gen Zhangsan qu Beijing.

1SG SHI with Zhangsan go Beijing

'It was with Zhangsan that I went to Beijing.'

Hence, it remains unclear whether or not the sentence-final *de* is the real source of the default past time interpretation in the *shi...de* sentence in (1). In addition, the past time interpretation in (1) – (3) is expected to be cancellable because it is a default interpretation. The future-oriented temporal adverb *mingtian* "tomorrow" can override the past time interpretation in the bare declarative sentence in (2) and the bare *shi* sentence in (3).

(4) Wo *mingtian* gen Zhangsan qu Beijing.

1SG tomorrow with Zhangsan go Beijing

'I will go to Beijing with Zhangsan tomorrow.'

(5) Wo **shi** *mingtian* gen Zhangsan qu Beijing.

1SG SHI tomorrow with Zhangsan go Beijing

'It is tomorrow that I will go to Beijing with Zhangsan.'

Surprisingly, the future-oriented temporal adverb *mingtian* "tomorrow" alone cannot override the past time interpretation in the *shi...de* sentence in (1).

(6) *Wo **shi** *mingtian* gen Zhangsan qu Beijing **de**.

1SG SHI tomorrow with Zhangsan go Beijing DE

Intended 'It is tomorrow that I will go to Beijing with Zhangsan.'

As Simpson & Wu (2002) note, the cancellation of the past time interpretation in the *shi...de* sentence requires both the future-oriented temporal adverb *mingtian* “tomorrow” and the future modal *hui* “will” or *yao* “will”, as shown in (7).

- (7) Wo **shi** mingtian *(hui/yao) gen Zhangsan qu Beijing **de**.
 1SG SHI tomorrow will with Zhangsan go Beijing DE
 ‘It is tomorrow that I will go to Beijing with Zhangsan.’

By examining the default temporal interpretation of bare declarative sentences, bare *shi* sentences, and *shi...de* sentences in terms of the aspectual classes of the predicates, I demonstrate that the default past time interpretation in *shi...de* sentences comes from the sentence-final *de*, which lends support to the previous analysis. I also show that the default past time interpretation in *shi...de* sentences only arises with dynamic predicates. In addition, I present new data in which the future-oriented temporal adverb alone seems to license a non-past interpretation.

2.0 The default past time interpretation associated with the sentence-final *de*

In this paper I assume that there exists a preferred correlation between the default temporal interpretation in bare declarative sentences and the telicity of the predicates based on the assumptions proposed by Lin (2006) and Bohnemeyer & Swift (2004).

Lin (2006) suggested that the temporal interpretation of bare declarative sentences (without any temporal adverb or aspectual marker) in Mandarin Chinese is determined by their viewpoint aspect. While bare declarative sentences with imperfective viewpoint aspect have a present interpretation, bare declarative sentences with perfective viewpoint aspect have a past interpretation. Bohnemeyer & Swift (2004) suggested that atelic situations, which are not marked for overt perfective aspect, are interpreted imperfectively in the default case, whereas telic situations are interpreted perfectly in the default case. The preferred correlation between the default temporal interpretation in bare declarative sentences and the telicity of the predicates is spelled out as follows.

Table 1. Default temporal interpretation in bare declarative sentences

| | telicity | default temporal interpretation |
|-----------------------|----------|---------------------------------|
| <i>state</i> | [-telic] | default present interpretation |
| <i>activity</i> | | |
| <i>achievement</i> | [+telic] | default past interpretation |
| <i>accomplishment</i> | | |

As the above table shows, while atelic situations such as states and activities have a default present interpretation, telic situations such as achievements and accomplishments have a default past interpretation.

- (8) a. Zhangsan hen ai Lisi. (*state*)
 Zhangsan very love Lisi
 ‘Zhangsan loves Lisi very much.’
 b. Zhangsan zai Beijing xue zhongwen. (*activity*)
 Zhangsan at Beijing study Chinese
 ‘Zhangsan studies Chinese in Beijing.’

- c. Zhangsan gen Lisi yiqi dida Beijing. (*achievement*)
Zhangsan with Lisi together arrive Beijing
'Zhangsan arrived in Beijing with Lisi.'
- d. Zhangsan gen Lisi yiqi qu Beijing. (*accomplishment*)
Zhangsan with Lisi together go Beijing
'Zhangsan went to Beijing with Lisi.'

The default temporal interpretation in bare *shi* sentences patterns the same as that in bare declarative sentences.

- (9) a. Zhangsan **shi** hen ai Lisi. (*state*)
Zhangsan SHI very love Lisi
'It is that Zhangsan loves Lisi very much.'
- b. Zhangsan **shi** zai Beijing xue zhongwen. (*activity*)
Zhangsan SHI at Beijing study Chinese
'It is in Beijing that Zhangsan studies Chinese.'
- c. Zhangsan **shi** gen Lisi yiqi dida Beijing. (*achievement*)
Zhangsan SHI with Lisi together arrive Beijing
'It was with Lisi that Zhangsan arrived in Beijing.'
- d. Zhangsan **shi** gen Lisi yiqi qu Beijing. (*accomplishment*)
Zhangsan SHI with Lisi together go Beijing
'It was with Lisi that Zhangsan went to Beijing.'

Interestingly, the default temporal interpretation in *shi...de* sentences is distinct from that in bare declarative sentences and bare *shi* sentences. While stative situations, i.e. states, have a default present interpretation, dynamic situations such as activities, achievements, and accomplishments have a default past interpretation.

- (10) a. Zhangsan **shi** hen ai Lisi **de**. (*state*)
Zhangsan SHI very love Lisi DE
'It is that Zhangsan loves Lisi very much.'
- b. Zhangsan **shi** zai Beijing xue zhongwen **de**. (*activity*)
Zhangsan SHI at Beijing study Chinese DE
'It was in Beijing that Zhangsan studied Chinese.'
- c. Zhangsan **shi** gen Lisi yiqi dida Beijing **de**. (*achievement*)
Zhangsan SHI with Lisi together arrive Beijing DE
'It was with Lisi that Zhangsan arrived in Beijing.'
- d. Zhangsan **shi** gen Lisi yiqi qu Beijing **de**. (*accomplishment*)
Zhangsan SHI with Lisi together go Beijing DE
'It was with Lisi that Zhangsan went to Beijing.'

The preferred correlation between the default temporal interpretation in *shi...de* sentences and the dynamicity of the predicates is spelled out as follows.

Table 2. Default temporal interpretation in *shi...de* focus clefts

| | | |
|-----------------------|------------|---------------------------------|
| | dynamicity | default temporal interpretation |
| <i>state</i> | [-dynamic] | default present interpretation |
| <i>activity</i> | [+dynamic] | default past interpretation |
| <i>achievement</i> | | |
| <i>accomplishment</i> | | |

To sum up, while the default past time interpretation arises with telic situations such as achievements and accomplishments in bare declarative sentences and bare *shi* sentences, the default past time interpretation arises with dynamic situations such as activities, achievements, and accomplishments in *shi...de* sentences. That is, the presence of the sentence-final *de* causes the temporal semantic feature associated with the default past time interpretation to shift from telicity in bare declarative sentences and bare *shi* sentences to dynamicity in *shi...de* sentences. The fact that the *shi...de* activity sentence in (10b) gives rise to a default past time interpretation, in contrast to the bare declarative activity sentence in (8b) and the bare *shi* activity sentence in (9b), indicates that the sentence-final *de* is the real source of the default past time interpretation in *shi...de* sentences involving dynamic situations.

3.0 The cancellation of the default past time interpretation

As mentioned earlier, the future-oriented temporal adverb *mingtian* “tomorrow” can override the default past time interpretation associated with telic situations in bare declarative sentences and bare *shi* sentences.

(11) Bare declarative sentence

- a. Zhangsan *mingtian* gen Lisi yiqi dida Beijing. (*achievement*)
Zhangsan tomorrow with Lisi together arrive Beijing
‘Zhangsan will arrive in Beijing with Lisi tomorrow.’
- b. Zhangsan *mingtian* gen Lisi yiqi qu Beijing. (*accomplishment*)
Zhangsan tomorrow with Lisi together go Beijing
‘Zhangsan will go to Beijing with Lisi tomorrow.’

(12) Bare *shi* sentence

- a. Zhangsan **shi** *mingtian* gen Lisi yiqi dida Beijing. (*achievement*)
Zhangsan **SHI** tomorrow with Lisi together arrive Beijing
‘It is tomorrow that Zhangsan will arrive in Beijing with Lisi.’
- b. Zhangsan **shi** *mingtian* gen Lisi yiqi qu Beijing. (*accomplishment*)
Zhangsan **SHI** tomorrow with Lisi together go Beijing
‘It is tomorrow that Zhangsan will go to Beijing with Lisi.’

However, the future-oriented temporal adverb alone cannot override the default past time interpretation associated with dynamic situations in *shi...de* sentences. The cancellation of the default past time interpretation in *shi...de* sentences require both the future-oriented temporal adverb *mingtian* “tomorrow” and the future modal such as *hui* “will” or *yao* “will” (Simpson & Wu 2002). Note that it remains unclear why the cancellation of the default past time interpretation in *shi...de* sentences requires the future modal *hui* “will” or *yao* “will”.

(13) *Shi...de sentences*

- a. Zhangsan **shi** mingtian *(hui/yao) zai Beijing xue zhongwen **de**.
Zhangsan SHI tomorrow will at Beijing study Chinese DE
'It is next year that Zhangsan will study Chinese in Beijing.'
- b. Zhangsan **shi** mingtian *(hui/yao) gen Lisi yiqi dida Beijing **de**.
Zhangsan SHI tomorrow will with Lisi together arrive Beijing DE
'It is tomorrow that Zhangsan will arrive in Beijing with Lisi.'
- c. Zhangsan **shi** mingtian *(hui/yao) gen Lisi yiqi qu Beijing **de**.
Zhangsan SHI tomorrow will with Lisi together go Beijing DE
'It is tomorrow that Zhangsan will go to Beijing with Lisi.'

Interestingly, it seems that the future-oriented temporal adverb *mingtian* "tomorrow" alone can license a non-past interpretation in the following cases involving a complex predicate with *kaishi* "start", as shown in (14).

- (14) a. Zhangsan **shi** mingtian kaishi shangxue **de**.
Zhangsan SHI tomorrow start up.school DE
'It is tomorrow that Zhangsan will start to go to school.'
- b. Zhangsan **shi** mingtian kaishi shangke **de**.
Zhangsan SHI tomorrow start up.class DE
'It is tomorrow that Zhangsan will start to go to class.'
- c. Zhangsan **shi** mingtian kaishi shangban **de**.
Zhangsan SHI tomorrow start up.work DE
'It is tomorrow that Zhangsan will start to work.'

Note that the data in (14) cannot be explained if the future modal *hui* "will" or *yao* "will" is required to override the default past time interpretation in *shi...de* sentences.

4.0 Conclusion

In this paper I examined the default past time interpretation associated with the sentence-final *de* and its cancellation in the *shi...de* focus cleft. Although it has been noted that the default past time interpretation in the *shi...de* focus cleft is associated with the sentence-final *de*, previous work has not yet studied the default past time interpretation in terms of the aspectual classes of the predicates systematically. I provided empirical support for the previous analysis of the default past time interpretation associated with the sentence-final *de*, in addition to showing that it only arises with dynamic predicates. Regarding the cancellation of the default past time interpretation, I presented new data in which the future-oriented temporal adverb alone seems to license a non-past interpretation. Given that all the new data involves the predicate *kaishi* "start", it is important to explore the contribution of the predicate *kaishi* "start" in relation to the cancellation of the default past time interpretation in the *shi...de* focus cleft in future research.

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